



## Kubrick and His Discontents

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# KUBRICK AND HIS DISCONTENTS

*Barry Lyndon* will almost certainly increase the confusion that has attended Stanley Kubrick's reputation since the release of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. For the technical aspects of his art, Kubrick is now generally acknowledged to be one of America's top three or four directors. But does the man have anything intelligent or intelligible to say; or does, as one reviewer has said with reference to *A Clockwork Orange*, his "intellectual poverty" limit his movies to "popfad art"? Since the recognized success of *Dr. Strangelove*, objections to Kubrick's obscurity, his enigmatic mind, his bleak view of man, his simplistic view of life, his boring mannerisms abound in the reviews of his films. *Barry Lyndon* seems destined to encourage the same ambivalent critical reaction. The preliminary reviews of the film almost unanimously praise its technical brilliance, but as often as not the reviewer ends by yawning with boredom. Is it, after all, anything more than a three-hour slide show for art-history majors? Stanley Kubrick apparently has nothing clear or profound or interesting or moving to say, but he says it magnificently. The assumption behind such critical evaluations of the film is that Kubrick's art exists merely as technique, that he gives us form without substance.

The confusion is compounded when one considers the source of his latest movie: Thackeray's first novel, *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*. It is not a very good novel, and Kubrick's deviations from his source are so surprising at times that one wonders what he saw in the novel to consider filming it in the first place. He excludes from the film a host of the novel's characters and he radically changes many others, notably Lady Lyndon and her son Lord Bullingdon. Reverend Runt appears in only one scene in the novel and has nothing to say. Hackton Castle's financial advisor, Graham, is entirely Kubrick's invention. So are certain scenes: Captain Feeny's robbery of

the young Redmond on the Dublin Road, the duel between Bullingdon and Barry in the abandoned church, and the final scene in which Lady Lyndon, Bullingdon, Runt, and Graham are settling the estate's accounts and putting the castle back in order. In the novel, Lady Lyndon escapes from Barry without the aid of Bullingdon, who is in Canada at the time. Barry is forced into exile by the pressure of his debts and dies of delirium tremens after spending 19 years in Fleet Prison. He never loses a leg in a duel with Bullingdon.

One thing is obvious from these deviations: Kubrick is not at all interested in faithfully reproducing another artist's interpretation of life. He has his own reading of life and he feels free to alter arbitrarily another artist's work in order to express his vision, his interpretation of his age. As an artist, Kubrick has developed at a remarkable pace, and it is interesting to follow his progress from the early melodramatic entertainment, *The Killing*, through the more subtle character studies in *Lolita* and *Paths of Glory*, to the nihilistic satire of *Dr. Strangelove*. This last movie alone earns him an artist's right to be taken seriously by his critics. To dismiss *Barry Lyndon* as a beautiful, but meaningless, piece of technical virtuosity, is to deny Kubrick the serious critical attention that is now his due.

In *Barry Lyndon*, Kubrick is making a significant statement about his age. In fact, along with *2001* and *A Clockwork Orange*, *Barry Lyndon* completes a trilogy on the moral and psychological nature of Western man and on the destiny of his civilization. *2001* itself is perhaps an emotionally and psychologically necessary response on Kubrick's part to the nihilism of *Dr. Strangelove*. The basic argument of the "Space Odyssey" is that mankind will survive the impending collapse of Western civilization. The film ends with an affirmation of life, an affirmation of the adven-

*Sublimated  
savages:  
the court  
of England.*



turous human spirit. Kubrick's affirmation, it is true, takes place outside of his cultural tradition, and the basic philosophical assumptions of the movie reject the Hebraic-Christian ideology that has functioned as the cohesive center of Western civilization for the past 2000 years. But if Kubrick rejects the Christian idea of God, he nevertheless believes a civilization can develop only if it is rooted in *an* idea of God. He would be very much surprised, he has said in a *New York Times* interview, "if the universe wasn't full of an intelligence of an order that to us would seem God-like." The "Space Odyssey" predicts man's imminent effort to re-establish contact with that divine intelligence.

In rejecting the claims of Western Hebraic-Christian civilization to significant order and meaningful form with the filming of *2001*, Kubrick does not submit to the Romantic argument that civilization corrupts the intrinsically good natural man. His view of man is clearly Freudian: the primal facet of the human personality is the id, the completely self-oriented structure that demands immediate gratification of its instinctual urges for food, shelter, and the propagation of itself. It is not moral or intellectual or sensitive to the needs or feelings of others. It simply is. Kubrick's fascination with this aspect of human personality can be traced from the prehuman creatures that achieve the miracle of conceptual thought at the beginning of *2001*,

through the character of Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, to the sublimated savages who inhabit the fashionable courts of Europe in *Barry Lyndon*.

Kubrick's trilogy is a disturbing study of a decadent civilization, decadent because the life-forms it has established for man to achieve the expression of his essential self are founded upon a false conception of the nature of man. Yet for all the bleakness that the critics have argued informs Kubrick's view of man, for all his negativism and pessimism, Kubrick is nevertheless struggling to strike an affirming note. Rebirth, renewal, the regeneration of the adventurous human spirit is the major dramatic point of *2001*. The civilization that begins when the prehuman creature, sitting before the skeleton of an animal, conceptualizes the thought that he can use an element in his environment as an extension of his will to gain dominion over his environment inevitably culminates with the astronauts voyaging through space on a mission to contact the suprahuman intelligence responsible for the monolith that has been uncovered on the moon. The immense distance between what man has become and what he began as is most dramatically expressed in the sudden juxtaposition of images that link the first two parts of the movie together: the image of the prehuman's ecstasy of savage gratification as he hurls the bone he has killed with into the air and the image of the spaceliner waltzing between

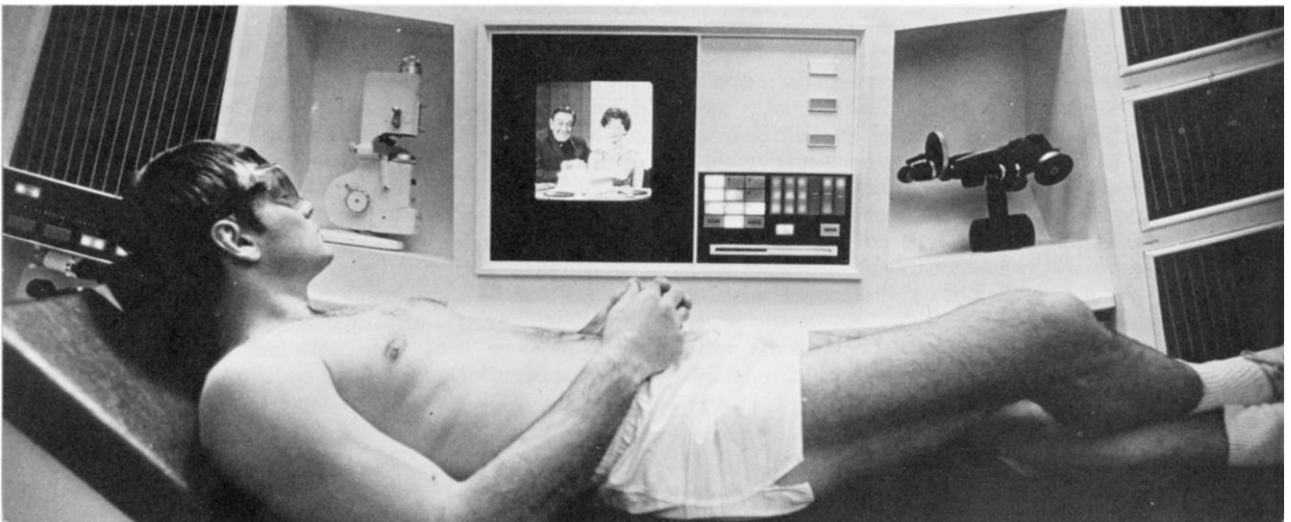
heaven and earth. Conceptual thought, first used for the immediate gratification of the instinctual need for food, has ultimately delivered mankind to the threshold of some cataclysmic discovery about itself and about the universe which is its home.

But *2001* is not finally a panegyric to Western civilization; it is, on the contrary, a prophecy of its doom. The substance of a Kubrick movie is always delivered through the images projected onto the screen; seldom, if ever, is it delivered through the dialogue. The scenes of the surviving astronaut who lands upon Jupiter, dines at an eighteenth-century table, and lies upon his death bed are certainly intended by Kubrick to suggest the impending extinction of the civilization whose technology has put him there. The concluding scenes are emblems meant to suggest the brittleness of the whole of Western civilization. The most subtly suggestive scene is the eighteenth-century dining scene, for it balances two earlier eating scenes: the savage consumption of food by the prehumans, who rip the raw flesh from the bones with their teeth, and the meal on board the *Discovery*, when the astronauts dine on synthetic foodstuff prepared by the computer. The fragility and effeteness of civilization are emphasized when the astronaut shatters his crystal glass during the formal ritual that the act of eating has become in the eighteenth century. Kubrick clearly understands the acquisition of food to be the primal need of the instinctual man. In formalizing the act of eating, in disguising its essential bestiality with crystal and china and silverware

and linen, man imbues the primal necessity with a dignity it does not intrinsically possess. The brittleness of the eating instruments which distance man from his instinctual self reflects the brittleness of what man has become.

Kubrick perceives that man, separated from his primal self, has become a mere mechanical force and is now little more than the instrument of the abstractions that he once conceptualized to serve him. This point he persistently and ironically enforces throughout the movie in the conflict he sets up between HAL and the astronauts. It is HAL who is the more human in his actions, the astronauts who are mechanical and faultless. HAL makes the mistake that jeopardizes the mission, commits murder, begs for his life. Neither astronaut, on the other hand, ever displays any emotion, and for Kubrick, mechanical man is a dead tree. Yet, the star-child that ascends into the cosmos at the film's conclusion emphasizes Kubrick's faith that man can renew himself, that he can in fact be "born again."

Thus, in spite of the film's many negative suggestions and overtones, the emphasis of *2001* is on birth and the regeneration of some primal human energy that urged man through a whole cycle of civilization. Two birthdays are celebrated during the course of the movie, the *Discovery* suggests a spermatozoon impregnating a cosmic womb, one astronaut has his umbilical life-lines cut and is hurled to his death in a reverse birth image, and the other astronaut dies just before the embryonic star-child ascends into the cosmos. The death of one way of life is the birth of



another. Kubrick does not know what new directions reborn man will take, but he believes the new direction will be initiated by a reconnection with the "God-like intelligence" that informs the universe. The force manifests itself in the monolith that appears just before the genius among the prehumans thinks his thought and impels the species through the cycle of civilization that culminates with the astronaut upon Jupiter, which is named, appropriately enough, after the chief divinity in Roman mythology. The appearance of the monolith on the moon initiates the space odyssey, and its appearance again at the deathbed of the astronaut clearly suggests that the rebirth of the human spirit will establish the species upon a broader spiritual basis than that upon which it had previously existed.

The assumption upon which the argument of *2001* is based is that Western civilization is moribund, that its cultural forms and social institutions no longer provide man with the significant order that makes life meaningful experience. In his next two movies, Kubrick's principal interest is to study the relationship between the individual man and the cultural forms through which that individual must achieve the expression of himself. At the heart of *A Clockwork Orange* and *Barry Lyndon* is the great philosophical question that is at the heart of all great art: What is man, and what must he do with his life? The orthodox Christian answer, that man is the supreme creation of God and must do the will of his creator as it has been revealed to him to achieve the salvation of his soul, has lost much of its credibility in the post-Nietzschean, post-Freudian, post-Einsteinian world, with the result that cynicism and despair threaten the very will of man to survive. Albert Camus, for example, has insisted that the only philosophical question that requires an answer today is the question of suicide, and it is really not too extravagant a generalization to say that most of the significant art of the twentieth century is an effort by the artist to affirm life, to justify the daily effort required not to commit suicide. Kubrick continues to sound the life-affirming note with which he concluded *2001* in both *A Clockwork Orange* and *Barry Lyndon*.

HAL, Alex, and Redmond Barry comprise a strange trio of modern heroes, for they contradict all the virtues Western culture has taught man to respect. HAL is a mere machine, Alex a brutal and violent hoodlum, and Barry a cruel, dishonest scoundrel. Yet all three emerge from their films as the most attractive and sympathetic characters, and for the same reason: they all are the most *human* characters in their environments. Those critics who condemn Kubrick for playing some sort of trick on the audience by making Alex a sympathetic character have committed themselves to the cultural assumptions it is Kubrick's major effort to debunk. If the answer to the great philosophical question is that man is some special creation of God who should dye his hair blue, live in a plastic apartment hundreds of feet in the air, and spend his days accumulating the platitudes and pop art of his culture, then Alex is indeed a threat to the moral order of the universe.

That Alex is a threat to his social order is the point of *A Clockwork Orange*, for Kubrick presents him as the chief evidence that the significant order of civilization is collapsing. Alex is the Freudian id, the savage instinctual man who operates only to gratify his basic urges. Socially, morally, emotionally he is no more advanced than the prehumans at the beginning of *2001*. Although Alex has the ability to think conceptually, he uses the talent for no better purposes than do the prehumans, that is, for the immediate gratification of his instinctual urges. The difference is that Alex's environment is no longer hostile: his meat is butchered for him in invisible stockyards, his shelter is provided by a benevolent government, and his instinct toward self-propagation is gratified by accommodating females. Thus the expression of his instinctual self, no longer necessary for the survival of the self, is horrifying.

Anthony Burgess, who believes that the forms of Christian civilization are necessary to protect man from his instinctual self and therefore must be preserved, has lamented that Kubrick failed to understand the point of his novel. The fact is that Burgess, as well as the many movie critics who have appreciated the novel, has failed to under-

stand the point of Kubrick's movie, which is grounded in a Freudian view of the dynamics of civilization. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud argues that a civilization progresses as it develops forms and institutions to restrict the free expression of the primal, asocial, instinctual id, or at least as it develops life-forms which permit the sublimation of its expression. Yet even the sublimated forms of civilization inevitably frustrate the vital, primal urges of the instinctual man; thus the "discontents" of Freud's title. Kubrick's discontents with civilization's forms are not only because they frustrate the instinctual man, but also because they deny that the instinctual self is intrinsic to man's nature. Kubrick insists upon this point throughout *A Clockwork Orange* by juxtaposing the brutal enactment of instinctual urges with sublimated

expressions of those urges. The popular song "Singin' in the Rain," for example, is a sentimental, sublimated expression of the same urge that is compelling Alex to the act he commits while singing it. Beethoven's music is a "higher" expression of the same instinctual compulsions, and when Alex attacks the health-spa proprietress with the sculpture of a phallus, she counters by swinging a bust of the great composer at him. Political activity is also no more than the sublimated urge to overpower all that is outside the id. The final scene of the movie, in which the government minister attempts to win Alex's endorsement and frees him to the strains of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, is perhaps overly contrived in its symbolism: the minister is metaphorically feeding his id as he is literally feeding Alex. Yet Malcolm McCowell's chewing performance in the scene projects all the libidinal energy that is Alex's vital characteristic and that somehow marks him as the healthiest individual in the movie.

If Freud is correct in arguing that civilization progresses as it develops forms and institutions to control the spontaneous expression of the id, then the converse becomes possible: a civilization in decline would be marked by the increasing ineffectuality of those forms to control the expression of the id and eventually by the unhampered re-emergence of the id itself. Alex is thus the chief manifestation of a collapsing civilization, as well as the chief threat to the continued viability of his culture's claims to meaningful forms. The thrust of Kubrick's insight, however, carries one step further. Although he presents Alex as the main force which is eroding the significant order of Western civilization, he also perceives that Alex embodies the libidinal energy which will drive the faltering human spirit through the collapse of that civilization. It is this characteristic which generates sympathy for Alex, which makes him the "hero" of the movie. Alex is the only character in the movie who is *not* a clockwork orange. He is the only character who never submits to the restricting and falsifying forms of his society, who never becomes the mechanical adjunct of moral or ethical or political abstractions, who operates always and only



from his primal, instinctual, human self. He is by no means admirable, but Kubrick insists that he is a real part of every man.

"Any attempt to create social institutions on a false view of the nature of man is probably doomed to failure," Kubrick has claimed in his *New York Times* interview. That the forms and institutions of Western civilization deny the Alex in every man, and therefore can only deform the social man as he seeks to express his essential self through them, is the central theme of *Barry Lyndon*. Redmond Barry's failure to achieve selfhood in the terms prescribed by his society is his tragedy, and by extension the tragedy of Western man. Eighteenth-century Europe, the world in which Barry must achieve self-hood, represents for Kubrick, as it had at the end of 2001, Western civilization at its most formal stage of development. Conformity to the innumerable codes of ritualized social conduct was essential for any man wishing to establish his value as a man. Barry, in his effort to become a "gentleman," accepts the validity of all the institutions of his day. Only once does he fail to act according to form, and that once destroys all his efforts to achieve his peerage, the highest life-form then available to man.

No critic will complain about the violence in *Barry Lyndon*. Yet numerically there are more violent scenes in *Barry Lyndon* than in *A Clockwork Orange*. Only in the scene in which Barry brutally attacks his stepson, however, does Kubrick present the violence as a savage phenomenon. The rest of the violent scenes are enacted according to rules which deny the source of the violent inspiration: in fact, the inspiration is falsified by being dignified with ritual. The scenes are countless: men and boys are shot, robbed, flogged, and beaten throughout the movie, but all according to forms which Western man had come to accept. In the British army, for example, Barry beats a fellow soldier to insensibility, but according to the rules of fair play—no biting, kicking, or scratching. First they are made to shake hands. The British soldiers march in straight ranks upon the straight ranks of French soldiers, whom they hope to impale upon their bayonets. In the Prussian army, men are made to

walk the gauntlet for minor offenses. Major offenses are punished by mutilation. Kubrick, perhaps responding to the criticism of gratuitous violence in *A Clockwork Orange*, decided not to film any scene of mutilation.

The core of Kubrick's insight in *Barry Lyndon* is this: the forms of civilization, which are intended to repress or sublimate the savage nature of man, only work to deform the social man. Barry's tragedy is that, in seeking to achieve the expression of himself—to "become" himself—he submits to all the values and life-forms of his culture. Surely no one today would argue that man fulfills God's will best by wearing powdered wigs and false beauty marks or by demanding satisfaction for insults by ritualized murder. Yet the eighteenth century believed it had evolved the social forms which were the highest expression of God's cosmic scheme, and which best permitted man to achieve and express the dignity inherent in his nature. Barry, in submitting to the values of his culture in an effort to become himself, ends physically deformed and spiritually corrupt. Since he is as much Everyman as is Alex, his fate is the fate of Western man.

This perception that the forms and institutions of civilization corrupt and deform man is Kubrick's alone; it is not the eighteenth century's, nor is it Thackeray's. Redmond Barry narrates his own story in Thackeray's novel, a technique which keeps the fatuous arrogance of the man always before the reader. Thackeray is not objecting to the forms of civilization as much as he is objecting to man's abuse of those forms. The man himself is the principal target of Thackeray's satire. Kubrick's use of a disinterested narrator, on the other hand, and the somewhat wooden performances he demands from the principal actors, redirects the aim of the satire. The performances of Marisa Berenson and Ryan O'Neal, especially, emphasize the extent to which cultural institutions distance the social man from his primal, vital self. The many excellent supporting roles all are directed by Kubrick to expose the darkness at the heart of every man. Leonard Rossiter as Captain Quin, for example, is barely able to control his rage when he is cut by a glass flung at his head by the

disappointed Redmond, and he is scarcely able to submerge his terror when he subsequently confronts Redmond in a duel. Man is "an ignoble savage," Kubrick has insisted. "He is irrational, brutal, weak, silly, unable to be objective about anything where his own interests are involved—that about sums it up."

This view of man, and the belief that the life-forms of Western culture do not permit man to achieve any real dignity, are most evident in the changes Kubrick has made in Thackeray's plot. The duel is the major social form which Kubrick uses to expose the false conception of human nature upon which Western civilization is structured. The movie begins and ends with duels, both invented by Kubrick: in the opening scene, Barry's father is killed in a duel, and Barry has his leg shattered in the final duel with his stepson. The duel between Barry and Captain Quin for the hand of Nora Brady is the only duel that appears in both the novel and the movie.

The final dueling scene is a masterful invention by Kubrick. In the novel, Bullingdon has gone to America to fight against the rebelling colonists. He does not return until after Barry's fortunes have been reversed. Lady Lyndon escapes the brutal Barry through the help of a former lover. To escape his creditors, Barry agrees to exile. His "luck" just winds down gradually. Thackeray invents no climactic scene to give point to the dissipated life of the hero. The message seems to be that false pride and hypocrisy will eventually destroy the man who fails to achieve a proper view of himself.

Kubrick's climactic scene is much more pointed, driving the various thematic strains he has been working with to their inevitable conclusion. The setting is an abandoned church, with pigeons (or are they mourning doves?) descending from the dark recesses of the roof's arches. Barry and Bullingdon confront each other in the nave and fire across the transept. The ritualized conduct is intended to assert the innate dignity of man, a dignity which is insisted upon by a religious ideology that Kubrick, with the abandoned church and the duel that mocks the crucifixion, finds to be empty and false. That the ritual expresses little nobility in man's character

is emphasized by Bullingdon's emetic reaction to receiving Barry's shot after his own gun misfires. What is motivating Bullingdon is not the outrage to his intrinsic dignity, but his savage compulsion to destroy the man who has come between him and his inheritance, and between him and his mother. When Barry's leg is shattered by Bullingdon's second shot and he screams with pain, Bullingdon himself emits an uncontrollable cry of joy, and for a fleeting moment the id expresses its ecstatic gratification upon his face. He has conquered that which was opposed to him. The finest ironic touch in the scene, however, is the doves, symbolic birds of peace, descending from the darkness above like epiphanic tongues of flame to give the lie to the conception of human character which is working itself out in the duel across the crucifix formed by the intersecting nave and transept.

The true inspiration of Western civilization is not the imitation of God's cosmic scheme, but money. Barry loses his youthful quest for his first love because he is penniless and his cousin Nora opts for a man who can bring 1500 pounds a year into the family coffers. When Barry finally does marry, he marries only for money, and, as Lord Wendover says, anybody with a yearly income of 30,000 pounds and an estate ought to be a peer. The way to a peerage is the flagrant display of wealth—saying the right things about art, appreciating the right kind of music, knowing the best people, giving extravagant entertainments. Barry almost squanders his wife's fortune in his campaign for a peerage, under the distressed but stoical eye of Graham. It is saved when Bullingdon, the champion of Christian civilization, returns to demand satisfaction for the beating Barry had given him, the beating that was not according to form. In mutilating Barry, Bullingdon makes civilization safe for Money and the Church. Symbolically, of course, he has unmanned Barry, he has spiritually castrated him.

The final scene of the movie is also Kubrick's invention. Bullingdon and his mother are reunited and are settling the debts of the estate, once again under the frozen stare of Graham and the self-satisfied and watchful gaze of Reverend Runt. It is a highly suggestive tableau. Under the



aegis of these two authorities, Capitalism and the Church, Western civilization marches its relentless way to the apocalypse of *A Clockwork Orange*. Barry, now impotent, accepts a cash compensation for his mutilation and exists with his mother, subdued past all further defiance.

It is not that Kubrick is suggesting the instinctual man be permitted unrestricted expression of himself, but that man recognize and acknowledge the savage in himself and develop cultural forms based upon the frank acceptance of that acknowledgment. Joseph Conrad, a writer known to Kubrick, has voiced a variant of Camus's only significant philosophical question. Stein, a character in the novel *Lord Jim*, claims that the real question is not "To be or not to be," but "How to be." He concludes, as Kubrick concludes, that man must "immerse" himself "in the destructive element," that is, man must embrace the savage in himself in order to control him. In the duel between Barry and his stepson, Barry is the true victor. Closer to his instinctual self than any other character in the story, Barry is able to control his rage and fire his pistol into the ground after Bullingdon's pistol misfires. It is true that Barry is distraught over the death of his

son Bryan, but O'Neal's performance in the scene does not in any way suggest his indifference to life. Instead, he struggles to control his fear and his rage. He is thus able to stand his ground to receive Bullingdon's second shot which shatters his leg. In so doing, he achieves a dignity that Bullingdon betrays with the joyful expression of gratified rage when he hears Barry's cry of pain. Although he is deformed by his civilization, Barry has achieved the only meaningful victory in the movie, the triumph over the savage in himself. It is only a passing victory, however. Kubrick's point is clear enough: man must embrace the Alex in himself to be whole again. He must reject his past, his cultural traditions, the dead moral scheme that falsifies life and deforms, rather than controls, the instinctual man.

The charge that Kubrick's later movies are devoid of meaning is thus nonsensical. The charge that he is ponderous and dull is comprehensible only if his ideas are ponderous and dull. The evidence of his trilogy on Western civilization supports the claim that he is one of America's top film directors. He is more than that. Stanley Kubrick is a critic of his age, one of its interpreters and one of its artists.

**BARRY SALT**

# Film Style and Technology in the Thirties

Now that some interest has arisen in the history of the influence of film technology on the forms of films, there has been an unfortunate tendency to exaggerate its importance, whereas in truth it appears that, as far as the more interesting aspects of movies are concerned, technology acts more as a loose pressure on what is done rather

than a rigid constraint. For instance, one can connect the move towards faster cutting in the middle thirties with the introduction of "rubber numbering" (or "edge numbering") of the cutting copies of the sound and picture tracks, but an opposite tendency towards longer takes, which began at the end of the thirties, seems to be